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What do I do with the rest of the class? The nature of teaching learning activities

Abstract

Cambourne discusses using teaching-learning activities that revolve around the use of small groups. He relates how teachers can keep the rest of their class productively engaged in learning as the teacher works with individuals or small groups.

Keywords

learning, activities, nature, class, i, teaching, do, rest

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What Do I Do with the Rest of the Class?: The Nature of Teaching-Learning Activities

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Teaching-Learning Activities

"What is the rest of the class doing?" This often asked question continues to puzzle teachers as they focus on small-group instruction.

Brian Cambourne

Teachers are inveterate collectors. They collect cotton reels, cardboard cylinders, and egg cartons. They queue up at conferences to collect posters, pamphlets, charts, and other publishers' freebies. It's important to keep in mind that teachers also collect more substantial things. While they might have a strong interest in physical paraphernalia with which to decorate their rooms, the main things they collect are *ideas*. They're continually on the lookout for a new idea or "way of doing things" that will make learn-

ing in their classrooms even more efficient and effective. Many of these ideas depend on the promotion and maintenance of independent learning. The number of professional books that have been written specifically to meet teachers' thirst for good, practical ideas and activities that work has reached astronomical proportions. This search for activities has even increased, due to recent developments in reading instruction, especially in relation to Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998). While the details of how Guided Reading *should* be done might vary from classroom to classroom, it always demands that the teacher devote his/her full attention to a small subgroup of the total class. Guided Reading presupposes that the rest of the class will be gainfully employed while the teacher's attention is fully focused on the small group participating in Guided Reading. This presupposition highlights a problem that teachers and school systems have faced since the beginning of formal education:

- How can I teach more than one learner at a time?
- What can I do to ensure that the rest of the class is productively engaged in learning while my attention

and energy are focused on the learning needs of only a few?

At first glance these questions may seem to reflect a lack of awareness of the dynamics of classroom organization, which in most instances will be remedied with experience. After all, don't most teachers ultimately learn to address this problem by giving those students who do *not* need their attention or expertise "things to do" which they believe will promote learning? Typically these "things to do" have labels such as seatwork activities, learning centers, worksheets, dittos, or learning games.

Why Study Teaching-Learning Activities?

The need for "things to do" has become more urgent as the policy-makers in countries like Australia, the USA, and the UK take up the mantra of "explicit and systematic teaching of reading." This mantra has led to system-wide mandates that instructional strategies such as Guided Reading, The Literacy Block, or Individualized Spelling become regular features of *all* classrooms. When I ask teachers about the issues associated with teaching more than one student at a time, they tell me that teaching-learning activities are very important for

literacy learning classrooms for two reasons:

- They are the main strategy that teachers have available to “free them up” so they can devote their energy and attention to students involved in Guided Reading.
- They are the basis for much of the collaborative learning and group work that takes place in these classrooms.

Most teachers are aware of the link between the teaching-learning activities that they employ, and the learning they want to achieve. If students *cannot* or *do not* engage deeply with these activities, teachers intuitively know that very little learning will occur. As a consequence, teachers are continually on the lookout for teaching-learning activities that “work.” Accordingly, teachers frequently ask me questions about how to keep the rest of their class productively engaged in learning as they work with individuals or small groups. Implicit in their questions is one more, less obvious question, “How can I help my learners become interdependent with respect to each other and independent with respect to me?”

When I initially explored these questions in a few classrooms, two things emerged that interested me. While one was expected, the other intrigued me. I fully expected that some teaching-learning activities would be more effective than others in helping students acquire literacy. What I didn’t expect was that some teaching-learning activities that were highly successful in one classroom would fail miserably in another, despite the fact that both teachers had applied similar procedures.

For example, in one classroom, Read and Retell (Brown & Cambourne, 1987) was highly successful. There was clear evidence that it

promoted independent and interdependent learning to a very high degree. The children were typically enthused by, committed to, and engaged in the retelling activities that the teacher prepared.

In another class, the same teaching-learning activity was typically greeted by a chorus of “yuks” and “augh” when the teacher announced, “Now I want you to do this retelling activity.” Students seemed to resist the initiation of Read and Retell as a regular teaching-learning activity. In our interviews, this teacher described how the teaching-learning activity would “fall flat,” in the sense that students just seemed to “go through the motions, as if it

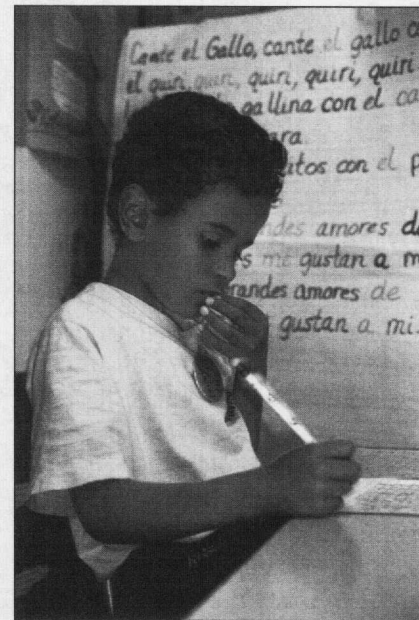
If students cannot or do not engage deeply with these activities, teachers intuitively know that very little learning will occur.

were some kind of unpleasant chore that had to be completed.”

This unexpected observation raised important issues for me. Perhaps there was more to teaching-learning activities than a standard set of procedures that teachers merely had to apply? Perhaps the effective use of teaching-learning activities went beyond the mere application of a set of procedural recipes? Such questions obviously warranted research.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Data were collected from nine grade 1 to 5 classrooms in two schools over nine consecutive years between 1989 and 1997. These nine classes covered the age-grade spectrum from grades 1 to 5, and were located in two different schools. School 1 supplied the data from



1989–1993. School 2 supplied the data for the years 1993–1997. Both schools were located in lower socioeconomic districts characterized by high unemployment, single-parent families, non-English-speaking students and some students from indigenous Aboriginal backgrounds. Teachers in these schools who were not directly involved in the project as well as parents and students were invited to participate.

A naturalistic paradigm of inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was adopted. Data were collected from these nine classrooms at least weekly, often twice per week. Data collection methods included:

- Weekly video recording of the daily two-hour language sessions.
- Weekly audio recording of teacher talk and pupil interactions in each session. These were converted to written transcripts.
- Field notes taken during these two-hour sessions.
- Regular, two- and three-way debriefing “conversations” between teachers, the researcher, and students.
- Purposive, ongoing, sampling and collection of classroom artifacts

such as teacher planning documents, and student work samples.

After nine years, the database comprises hundreds of hours of video and audio records; thousands of pages of transcripts, field notes, and interviews; as well as hundreds of documents and classroom artifacts. The basic analytic procedure employed was the hermeneutic dialectic process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) that involves a continuous cycle of data-collection → joint-data-analysis → more-data-collection → joint-interpretations → multiple-constructions-of-meaning. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data and the interpretations, the following processes were employed: prolonged engagement on the site, persistent observation, triangulation, negative case analysis, peer debriefing, member checking, and referential adequacy (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Some Preliminary Results

A number of interesting initial findings emerged. For example, it was obvious that students were continually expected to engage in what Australian teachers call "teaching-learning activities." These were given a range of idiosyncratic labels including, Print Walks, Retellings, Hot Seat, Drop Everything And Read (D.E.A.R.), Author Study, The Paraphrase Game, Innovation of Text, Create a Blurb, Design a Cover, and Sequencing. Furthermore, they were integral parts of the literacy learning cycle. Some activities were more successful than others and it was this result that became the focus of this project.

What Makes for a "Successful" Teaching-Learning Activity?

One of our first discussions as a research team involved how to determine what a successful teaching-learning activity "looked like." We

decided that teaching-learning activities were successful if they met three criteria:

Criterion #1: Engagement in Activity

A majority of learners had to be deeply engaged in the activity as they actually did it.

Criterion #2: Internalization and Transfer

Learners had to demonstrate that they had successfully applied something learned in one context to a different context. There had to be clear evidence that something from the activity was used appropriately to support learning by the student at some later time. This "something" could be a concept, a fact, an understanding, a skill, a strategy, an awareness, a realization, or another kind of know-how related to literacy acquisition.

Criterion #3: Promotion of Collaborative, Independent, and Interdependent Learning

The teaching-learning activities had to promote collaboration, independence, and interdependence in the learners, thus providing opportunities for teachers to work one-on-one, or with small groups, as needed.

The methods of data collection in this study supported the application of these criteria to the data. Accordingly, each of the teaching-learning

three criteria were categorized as teaching-learning activities that worked. Those that could not meet all three criteria were allocated in the "didn't work" category.

An Illustrative Example of a Teaching-Learning Activity That Worked

One teaching-learning activity that worked was called "Taking-a-Print-Walk." Print Walks are analogous to the guided or self-directed "tour" that occurs in museums, art galleries, and so on, except that print is the focus of the tour. The following is an exemplar of the successful implementation of this teaching-learning activity.

The teacher of one grade 1 classroom, Hazel (pseudonym), used every opportunity to create and display print on chart paper. She made a point of jointly constructing these charts with the students. Songs, poems, rhymes, jingles, days of the week, months of the year, daily weather, students' names, summaries of previous lessons, syntheses of previously discussed ideas and discoveries, lists of frequently used words, and so on, were written on charts and displayed around the room. My field notes record that, "The room was a sea of print. It was awash with demonstrations of the written form of language."

These charts were used every day. On some occasions, Hazel began the day by inviting her students to col-

The teaching-learning activities had to promote collaboration, independence, and interdependence in the learners, thus providing opportunities for teachers to work one-on-one, or with small groups, as needed.

activities identified in the database were evaluated based on each of these criteria. Those that were judged to display high degrees of all

laboratively read or sing the charts with her as she pointed to the words with a pointer. On other occasions, she played a game called Word De-

tective and gave pairs of children cards which contained copies of words around the walls and asked them to help each other "sound them out" and then "find them on the charts around the room." Hazel also took her class, either as a whole or in small groups, on such tours at least once every day, sometimes more often. Print Walks could last from five to fifteen minutes and no two were identical. On some days, Hazel would focus the students' attention to the way print worked at the sub-word level, exploring visual, auditory, and/or orthographic patterns of letters, syllables, rimes, and onsets. On other occasions she might have them focus at the above-word level by asking them to classify and group words by patterns of letter names and shapes, by phonemic patterns within the word, or by semantic and/or syntactic features. Whatever the focus, the Print Walk was an activity during which students collaboratively studied print and how it worked, and shared their discoveries with each other.

These Print Walks were considered to be a successful learning activity for three reasons:

- The video, audio, interview, and field note data contained clear evidence of deep engagement from students.
- What students learned about print during this teaching-learning activity showed up in other situations.
- The video, audio, interview, and field note data contained numerous examples of students collaborating, supporting each other, and sharing their different degrees of knowledge about print and the way it worked.

Classroom Vignettes of Teaching-Learning Activities

The following two vignettes of classrooms using teaching-learning activities indicate how these three

criteria for effective activities were applied in the classroom.

Vignette 1: Demonstrations of Children's Knowledge of Print. This vignette from Hazel's grade 1 classroom was drawn from the field notes and audio/video records of a typical morning in the first week of April, the ninth week of the first term of the new school year. The previous day, Hazel had conducted a shared book session with the whole class, using an enlarged retelling of "The Little Red Hen." On this morning, Hazel had planned to demonstrate how a simple form of a literary sociogram (Johnson & Louis, 1987) could be developed by jointly constructing one based on the characters in the story. After about five minutes, the chart looked like Figure 1.

Hazel pointed to the circle that contained the word "dog" and asked:

Hazel: *What was the dog like? What's a word that we could write on the line next to dog, which would describe the dog?*

Class: *Lazy.*

Hazel: *How do you spell lazy? Help me.*

Class: *l-a-z* [spelling out. The teacher writes each letter as they call it out. At this point there is a lack of response. The class seems to be stuck for the next letter.]

Hazel: *What letter or letters carry the "ee" sound?*

Chris: [Being very definite in his answer] *It's "y."*

Hazel: *How do you know?*

Chris: *I think I've seen it. It's "y" on the end of "lady" and "baby."*

Hazel: *That's very interesting, Chris. Could it be anything else?*

Chris: [Again, with firm conviction] *Yes, "e."*

Hazel: *Why?*

Chris: *Because it's "e" in "he," "she," and "we."*

Hazel: *Did you hear what Chris just said? There are two letters that he knows of that can carry the*

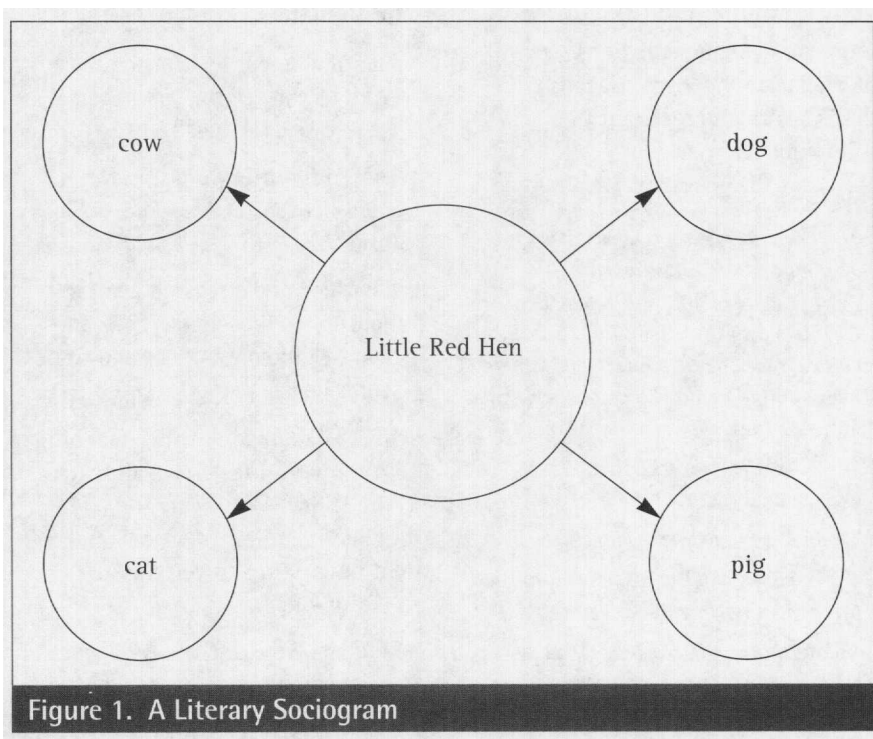


Figure 1. A Literary Sociogram

"ee" sound. Isn't it interesting? The "ee" sound in "lazy" could be "y" because it's "y" in "baby" and "lady," or it could be "e" because it's "e" on "he," "she," and "we." Could it be anything else?

Chris: It could be double "ee."

Hazel: Could it? How do you know?

Chris: 'Cause I saw it in "meet" and "sleep" and it's on that chart over there, in "feet."

Hazel: So, Chris knows three different sets of letters that can carry the "ee" sound: "y," "e," and double "ee" . . . [voice trailing off].

Chris: I know some others, like "e-a" in "eat" and "meat" and "e-i" 'cause that's how my friend Leif writes his name.

For a five-year-old, Chris displays an impressive depth of letter sound knowledge and understandings of the way that the phonemic system and the orthographic system "work" in English. Chris has obviously engaged deeply with the demonstrations of print that have been available. The most frequently occurring demonstrations of such knowledge occurred during Print Walks.

Vignette 2. Demonstrations of Transforming Print. Hazel describes this vignette in the following manner.

It was during an Australian unit of work and my Year 1 class was singing and reading the words to "Please Don't Call Me a Koala Bear." At the end of the singing I asked the children to look at the text and to tell me anything about the print they had noticed. The answers ranged from:

"I can see the word Koala written seven times."

"I can see the word 'be' inside 'bear.'"

"I can count eight contractions and fifteen words which start with 'd.'"

Amanda then offered her observation as she looked at the word "don't,"

"If you rub off part of the circle on the bottom of the d and turn it upside down, and get rid of the apostrophe and the t, turn the n upside down, then the word would become 'you.'"

We all learned from Amanda that morning. Suddenly, we had a rush of transformations as children learned to break up words, transform graphics, and talk about the subtle ways in which English was written. They were internalizing the graphic relationship between the letters "h" and an "n," the fact that "q" is an upside down "d," that the word "I," the letter "I," and the number 1 all look pretty much the same. Fascinating stuff when coming unsolicited from fresh minds.

Hazel's description of this event makes it evident that Amanda's insights went far beyond the more superficial examination of written words indicated by other children. Amanda was really tuned into not only spelling, but the fine graphic details of each letter. The major learning activity that had preceded this vignette were the daily Print Walk/Wall Print activities in which children:

- Identified repetitions of the same word ("I can see the word Koala written seven times.")
- Looked for little words inside big words ("I can see the word 'be' inside 'bear.'")
- Identified and discussed contractions or word beginnings ("I can count eight contractions and fifteen words which start with D.")

Print Walks (or any other teaching-learning activities) were allocated to the Didn't-Work category if the video, audio, interview, and field note data showed any of the following:

- students were *not* deeply engaged while participating in the activity.

- little or no evidence of transfer/spillover to other learning events and/or contexts.
- no obvious evidence of children sharing their knowledge and supporting each other's learning about print.

So What Makes for an Effective Teaching-Learning Activity?

We examined many vignettes from a range of classrooms to identify the factors that made some teaching-learning activities so successful in facilitating children's learning. From this analysis, we determined that effective learning activities generally displayed *all* or *most* of the following eight characteristics:

1. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Explicitly Linked to Other Parts of the Class. Successful teaching-learning activities generally were *not* stand-alone, isolated events. They were typically linked to other parts of the day or session. Furthermore, these links were deliberately planned by the teacher and

Successful teaching-learning activities generally were not stand-alone, isolated events.

were made explicit to the students. In other words, both the students and the teacher were consciously aware of them.

An example of how this characteristic looks in practice is taken from observations in a grades 3 and 4 combination classroom with a teacher named Mary (pseudonym). Her daily schedule looked like Figure 2.

Mary began each two-hour literacy session with a Teacher Read-Aloud where she read from books she de-

9:00 am–11:00 am: Literacy Session

Timing	Episode
15–20 Minutes	Teacher Read-Aloud
15–20 Minutes	Demonstration Time
30–35 Minutes	SSR
40–60 Minutes	Activity Time
20–30 Minutes	Sharing Time
15-Minute Break—Milk, Snacks, & Playtime	

11:15 am–12:30 pm: Mid-Morning Session

10 Minutes	Personal Reflection on Morning's Literacy Learning
80 Minutes	Other Curriculum Areas (Math, Social Studies, Science, etc.)

60-Minute Break—Lunch and Play

1:30–3:30 pm: Afternoon Session

120 Minutes	Other Curriculum Areas (Science, Art, Craft, Technology, Music, Gym, etc.)
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Figure 2: Mary's Daily Timetable/Schedule

scribed as “good literature.” Teacher Read-Aloud was typically followed by Demonstration Time during which she gave direct, whole-class demonstrations on skills that she believed were important for effective literate behavior. The class then engaged in SSR, followed by Activity Time. During Activity Time, Mary aimed to “free herself up” so that she could engage in guided reading with a small group of four or five students. The class then engaged in Sharing Time. Finally, after the morning break, her students reflected in their learning journals for 5–10 minutes on the nature of any learning they thought they’d achieved during the morning.

On one day during Teacher Read-Aloud, Mary explicitly drew the students’ attention to special features of the text she was reading, namely, how the writer used similes

to achieve certain effects. During Demonstration Time, Mary wrote these similes on the chalkboard and drew attention to the function and structure of similes as rhetorical devices. Together, she and the students developed the first draft of a chart entitled “What Makes a Simile a Simile?” This chart was worked on over a number of sessions until all of the class (especially Mary) was satisfied that it was “ready for publication.” The final published version of the chart listed the jointly constructed criteria that characterize similes and their rhetorical functions, and it was displayed for students to refer to in subsequent activities.

Before Mary sent the students off for SSR, she encouraged them to look for similes as they read and to jot them in their Reading Log Book for Sharing Time. During Activity

Time, Mary asked one group to revisit the similes from the same text she had read earlier and to write a short paragraph or sentences using as many of them as they could. She was careful to explain that this activity was one that “might result in unnatural, contrived sentences,” and that no one in the real world would construct such contrived sentences in the everyday ebb and flow of social behavior. She went on to explain that the reason that she was asking them to construct sentences which “might sound a bit unusual” was that it would force them to “think about meanings and similes and the whole process of trying to make sense.”

Another group was asked to find examples of similes in other texts using the criterion chart that they had developed together. Yet another group was asked to generate its own set of similes and share them with the class, comparing what they created both with the criteria listed on the chart and the original set they had identified during Teacher Read-Aloud.

During Sharing Time, students were expected to volunteer to share anything related to similes from the various engagements that had occurred that morning. During Personal Reflection Time, immediately after the morning break, students were given time to reflect on their morning’s learning in their Learning Journals. They were asked to:

- Make explicit any of their *aha*’s or insights about the structure and function of similes;
- Describe what they’d achieved when working on the separate simile activities by identifying any learning blocks they encountered while doing the simile activities and describing how they overcame them;
- Share finished simile-related products and seek feedback from the group;

Selected Software for Computer Teaching-Learning Activities

One area of the classroom that may provide unique opportunities for highly engaging and interactive Teaching-Learning Activities is the computer center. This annotated reference list describes selected software that creates possibilities for children's engagement, internalization/transfer, and independent learning of literacy concepts and skills. Remember that these software programs need to be integrated meaningfully into the curriculum or they will become just another form of "busywork."

Software Program: A to Zap!

Type of Software: Interactive Game Playing (Macintosh or Windows)

Grade/Age: Pre-K–first grade

Description of C-TLA Opportunities: Emergent readers are likely to be highly engaged as they learn about letter and word recognition and how to make letters. Children enter the virtual world of a colorfully rendered screen playroom where they may focus on knowledge about letters of the alphabet and vocabulary. For example, a child may be directed by the classroom teacher to predict the name of a letter before clicking on a screen display of an alphabet block. The child's prediction will be confirmed or denied when the computer says the letter name. Next, the child may click on the letter, which results in the

computer pronouncing a word that begins with that letter. The letters of the word appear in order on a toy box followed by a picture of that word. A child may click on the object to see an additional animation. The program allows a teacher to add words into the games.

Software Program: Bailey's Book House

Type of Software: Interactive Reading and Writing (Macintosh or Windows)

Grade/Age: Pre-K–2nd grade

Description of C-TLA Opportunities: This program includes five learning activities. When playing Edmo & Houdini, students have opportunities to learn prepositions (behind, over, under) using illustrations (a dog, a doghouse, a clown) to help visualize and internalize concepts as they position and reposition the illustrations. Letter Machine supports children's graphophonic awareness as they learn sounds and names of letters (Aa = Apes as in aim). Make-A-Story allows children to create a story with four sentences and supportive illustrations. Read-A-Rhyme may help develop phonemic awareness by creating rhymes and using four different phonogram families. Kid Cards provides children with tools to create greeting cards using words and images. Children are sometimes allowed to select a

- Make explicit any connections about the structure and function of similes as related to reading, writing, spelling, talking, listening, and life in general;
- Read the final draft of a poem, chart, song, or spoof involving similes which they had written.

My data showed that Mary's students *did* engage with activities like these. The video- and audiotape records quite clearly reveal facial expressions, body language, and student talk indicating that the students were involved, were enjoying themselves, knew the purpose of the activities, and were on task.

Furthermore, there was clear evidence in later events that the majority of students had internalized many of the concepts and understandings associated with similes and "simile-ness" experienced during these sessions. For example, there is evidence of conscious use of similes in their own writing, and there were many examples of discussions about the criteria generated on their "What Makes a Simile a Simile?" chart.

"Simile-ness" was the thread that permeated just about every engagement in Mary's two-hour literacy session on this day. The teaching-

learning activities she employed were linked to other parts of the teaching-learning session/day through the concept of a simile. Furthermore, she deliberately planned these links and made them explicit to students. The evidence from my interviews shows conclusively that both the students and the teacher were consciously aware of these links.

2. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Frequently Introduced by Language Which Explicitly Stated the Teachers' Learning Purposes for the Activity. Teachers in this study typically prefaced successful activi-

question/answer mode in response to computer-generated activities. Teachers will also appreciate the access to directions for the program activities, program goals, and suggestions for additional activities.

Software Program: EasyBook

Type of Software: Publishing and Storytelling
(Macintosh or Windows)

Grade/Age: Kindergarten–4th grade

Description of C-TLA Opportunities: EasyBook allows children to create their own books on the computer and print the pages out in the form of a book. Many options are included for drawing, painting, adding stamps, and typing in text. Children type in their names, title of the book, and publisher name on a screen which shows what the cover of the book looks like. No colors or graphics may be added to the cover. Pages are numbered and displayed like an open book. Children can click on the left or right arrows at the top of the book pages to navigate through the pages of their book as they compose their story. Children may format the text and illustration at either the top or bottom of each page. A menu bar at the top of the screen and a toolbar on the left allow easy access to composing and publishing tools. Children's ability to work independently is fostered

as they decide how to customize their work by selecting from a variety of fonts, styles, artistic tools, and cut/paste functions.

Software Program: Ultimate Reader 2.0

Type of Software: Utility; Text Reader (Macintosh or Windows)

Grade/Age: Any

Description of C-TLA Opportunities: Ultimate Reader uses synthesized, computer-generated speech to read aloud text files. This program also contains a web browser which can be used to read pages on the web and display images. Text on screen is highlighted word by word to reinforce voice-print match so that struggling readers can access and listen to any digitized text. Many options are provided for users, including rate, pitch, and type of computer voice. Highlight options include text font, size, and color, and background color. This program provides independence for students who may need additional help decoding difficult words. While there is no animation, the user's ability to control all settings and program features is likely to offer high levels of engagement.

—Linda D. Labbo

ties by explicitly drawing learners' conscious awareness to:

- The reasons for being asked to participate in the activity.

"I've prepared this cloze activity which I want you to complete in groups of three or four. Now, I know that we don't usually do cooperative cloze exercises in the real world outside of school, but I want you to have a go at this one because by doing cloze cooperatively we are also practicing many of the skills of thinking and learning that really good readers do automatically."

- The links between the activity and the underlying purposes of school learning.
"Why do we have SSR everyday? That's right. So that we can practice reading for long periods of time, because we want to become really good readers, don't we? Why do you think we need to become really good readers? That's right. Because the more we read, the more we know, and the more we know, the better we can think and learn. People who are good learners have lots of opportunities to enjoy life and achieve whatever they want in our country."

- The subconscious and/or automatic processes that might be used in the activity.

"When you're doing a cooperative cloze activity and you come to a blank, what do you do? How do you work out what's been left out? Here are some things I've learned to do when I get reader's block. One thing I do is to ask myself: what would make sense here? What's a word that would fit in here, that makes sense, that sounds like English, and which looks right? Watch me while I think out loud as I do the first one for you."

3. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Ones in Which Students Had to Engage in Social Interaction and Cognitive Collaboration.

Social interaction and cognitive collaboration roughly equate to discussion and reflection, important features of effective learning activities. Collaboration and problem solving involve discussion that, in turn, involves engaging in dialogue focused on specific content, concepts, and ideas. Reflection is identical except for one thing; one does it alone rather than with others. Reflection is essentially a "monologue-with-self," a special form of soliloquy. My data suggest that both are necessary prerequisites for learning, in the sense that discussion with others leads to discussion with self (reflection) which in turn leads to more discussion with others, and so on, and this in turn produces learning.

Effective teaching-learning activities, therefore, were those which involved sharing, discussing, arguing, clarifying, explaining, making personal connections, thinking out loud, listening to others think out loud, negotiating meanings and interpretations, and jointly constructing and interpreting texts.

4. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Structured so that Learners Were Encouraged to Use More than One Mode of Language. Those activities that involved students in using more than one language system worked much better than those that involved using only one. For example, there are at least two ways of completing a sequencing activity where students are given a text that has been randomly cut up and are asked to reconstruct it.

One way to do this activity is to give the text to individual children and tell them to re-sequence the text alone, without communicating with

anyone else. A sequencing activity done under these conditions requires students to use only one of the language systems—silent reading.

Another way is to put the children into groups of four and tell them that they are to help each other reconstruct the text, talk about it, and then jointly make a written list of the textual cues they used to help them in the sequencing process to present at sharing time. A sequencing activity under these conditions encourages students to read silently and orally, talk, discuss and listen, write, and later discuss. The four language systems—talking, listening, reading, and writing—are all used.

5. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Structured so that Learners Were Encouraged to Draw on More than One Subsystem of Language.

Those activities that involved students in ranging across and drawing on more than one of the various subsystems (i.e., semantic, syntactic, or graphophonic systems) of language were more effective than those which only involved a focus on one. For example, if in completing a teaching-learning activity students went from the whole text to letter/sound correspondences within the text to other experiences with text, and continued to go back and forth and up and down playing the full linguistic scale, they consistently internalized more knowledge and understandings which supported literacy. Vignette 1 is a good example of this. The class and Chris continually move from the level of the whole text of "The Little Red Hen" to the sentence level, down to the word and phoneme level, and back up to the text level.

6. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Structured so that Learners Were Frequently Encouraged to Transfer Meaning across and/or within Different Semiotic Sys-

tems. A semiotic system is a system for creating meaning. The predominant semiotic system in most human cultures is oral language. Other semiotic systems include art, drama, written language, song, music, sign language, body language, and so on.

Manipulating meanings *across* different semiotic systems occurs when one takes the meanings that have been constructed using one semiotic system and tries to reconstruct them, with minimal changes in overall meaning, using another semiotic system. A simple example would be taking a text that has been read and converting it to a dramatic performance, or taking a piece of art and describing the meanings of the visual images in written text. Yet another would be taking a technical diagram (e.g., a diagram of how a blast furnace works) and converting it to written text.

Manipulating meanings *within* different semiotic systems occurs when one engages in different forms of paraphrase. Such paraphrasing activities could include:

- Creating a spoof of a well-known form, such as Fractured Fairy Tales, Politically Correct Fairy Tales, Rewritten Nursery Rhymes (e.g., "Three Blind Mice" becomes "A Trio of Myopic Rodents");
- Creating puns using different genre (e.g., rewriting epitaphs, advertising jingles, same headlines for different kinds of newspapers, bumper stickers or t-shirts with double entendres, Chinese fortune cookies, graffiti, and so on);
- Creating new lyrics for well-known tunes (e.g., from the opera "Carmen": "Tor-e-a-dor / don't spit on the floor / spit out the window / that's what it's for")
- Creating new forms of well-known poems (e.g., borrowing from "The Man from Snowy River": "There was

Children's Books that Feature Environmental Print

Arnold, Tedd. *The Signmaker's Assistant*. (Puffin, 1997).

Collins, Pat. *Don't Tease the Guppies*. Illus. M. Hafner. (Putnam, 1994).

Crews, Donald. *Truck*. (Mulberry, 1991).

Cuyler, Margery. *Road Signs: A Hare-Race with a Tortoise*. Illus. S. Haskamp (Winslow, 2000).

Hoban, Tana. *I Read Signs*. (Mulberry, 1999).

Hoban, Tana. *I Read Symbols*. (Morrow, 1987).

Hutchins, Pat. *Don't Forget the Bacon*. (Mulberry, 1989).

Marshall, James. *Old Mother Hubbard and Her Wonderful Dog*. (Sunburst, 1993).

—Marilyn Carpenter

movement in the playground for the word had got around that the teachers were on strike this very day. They'd joined the big procession to ask for better pay and left the kids in utter disarray.")

The data show that teaching-learning activities which involve learners in manipulating meanings across and within different semiotic systems were more effective than those which kept students operating within just one semiotic system.

It seems that teaching-learning activities which have this characteristic may force students to operate at a metacognitive level. It makes them consciously aware of language and how it functions as a meaning-making system. Teaching-learning activities which possess high degrees of this feature create conditions for learners to reflect on and make explicit the connections and relationships between different forms of language and between different ways of constructing meaning. As Mary commented during an interview, "teaching-learning activities which promote metacognitive

awareness promote learning *about* the language by providing opportunities for learners to get inside text."

Teaching-learning activities which involve the intense manipulation of meanings across different semiotic systems and/or within the same semiotic system tend to push learners to a deeper level of understanding of how language functions, or as Mary commented, "turns them into potential functional linguists who would make Michael Halliday proud." The discussion, reflection, talking, writing, and listening which accompany such activities help bring to conscious awareness that which was previously only known at the unconscious, intuitive level. As a consequence, learners become metacognitively aware of language, and this results in students gaining more control of their language use.

7. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Structured so that Learners Were Able to Offer a Range of Acceptable Responses. Teaching-learning activities that did not have rigid, invariant right or wrong responses seemed to work better than

those that did. In other words, those activities that allowed students to respond in a range of ways and to create a range of acceptable and plausible products (answers are considered as products in this sense) were more successful than those that allowed for only one response and/or product.

For example, some publishers have prepared cloze activities (or, to be more precise, worksheets) where students are asked to select one correct solution to replace the deletion. Usually, these worksheets are finished individually by students and then graded by the teacher. This activity offers no degrees of freedom of response. One's response is judged to be either right or wrong. There are no shades of gray allowed, and no discussion.

On the other hand, cloze activities can be prepared so that students replace the deletion with what they think is the *best* replacement. What is even more powerful is that students work in pairs to come to some consensus concerning what they believe is the most appropriate replacement. This creates a situation where everyone's replacement needs to be shared, discussed, defended, justified, and negotiated. These processes inevitably lead to reflection, intellectual unrest, modification of one's pool of knowledge and understanding, and therefore, more effective learning.

We are not suggesting that teachers can or should have an "anything goes" attitude, or that they should accept any and all responses without comment or even some criticism. There were times when teachers in this study were aware that a student's product or response was simply wrong or misinformed, and to let it pass would have given the student the wrong message about the purpose of the activity.

Honest responses to students are both appropriate and necessary. For example, in a sequencing activity where two students were asked to re-sequence a cut-up piece of text, it was obvious to Mary that their attempt at sequencing was indeed "very wrong." After a quick glance at the students' attempt, Mary commented, "I think you two need to re-read your new text. The way you've put it back together doesn't make sense to me, so I think you have something in the wrong sequence. Read it aloud and listen to the meaning and try again."

8. Effective Teaching-Learning Activities Were Cost Efficient and Developmentally Appropriate. Teachers are very busy people. They cannot spend inordinate amounts of time designing teaching-learning activities that give them limited returns in terms of student learning. There is little point in spending two hours designing and preparing a teaching-learning activity that engages students for ten minutes. Nor does it make sense for activities to be so complex that only the most able in the class can attempt them, or so simple that only the least able find any challenge in them. It is also important that, where possible, the activity can be reused on numerous occasions by students.

I found that teachers coped with the issue of developmental appropriateness by manipulating the following two variables:

- The level of complexity of the texts the students used and/or produced;
- The literacy/language processes and procedures that could be applied to these texts.

For example, the majority of language processes that students need to draw on to complete a teaching-learning activity such as designing a blurb for a book, are reading,

talking, listening, writing, drawing, acting-out, artistic construction, and so on. Most students in any class are capable of performing some or all of these processes at a level appropriate to their language development. However, the texts to which students are expected to apply these processes, and the texts they produce as a consequence of applying these processes can vary significantly in complexity. For example, two grade 3 students could both design blurbs for books of quite different levels of complexity.

With respect to the issue of cost efficiency, my data show that teachers favored activities that were reusable. For example, once a blurb has been demonstrated and used by the teacher in front of the whole class or a small group, the same procedures can be applied over and over again to different texts by students working in pairs or even on their own without teacher guidance. Another example is that the sequencing activity can be developed and stored in a place to be used by students over and over during free time.

Is That All There Is to Effective Teaching-Learning Activities?

As indicated earlier, some teachers seem to be able to use teaching-learning activities in ways that work while others were less successful. This suggests that there's more to effective teaching-learning activities than a simple set of behavioral routines that teachers have to apply and students have to follow. My data strongly suggest that there are deep layers of multiple assumptions, values, and ways of thinking.

I think that a teacher's decision to design or use a teaching-learning activity reflects and presupposes a whole range of underlying assump-

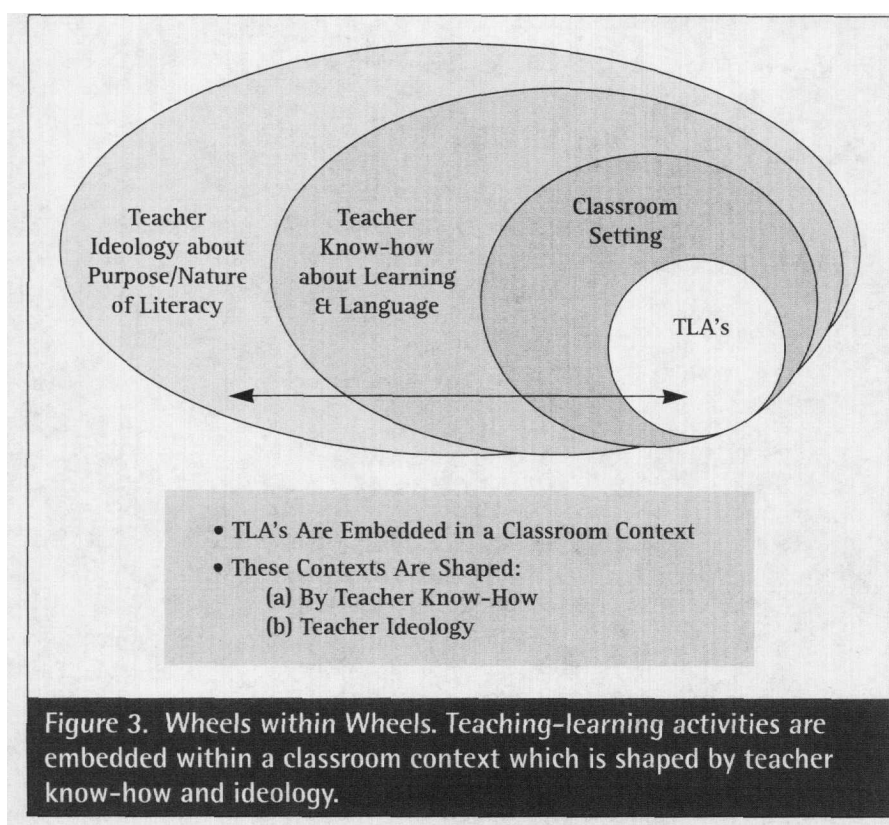
tions about such things as effective literacy behavior, the role language plays in acquiring effective literacy, what it means to learn, what it means to understand, what it means to instruct, what is meant by assessment and evaluation of literacy learning, and what kind of literacy is best for the cultures in which their students must live. It doesn't stop here. Below this layer are further layers of assumptions about philosophical abstractions such as the nature of truth and the good life in an ideal society. Figure 3 captures some of this complexity:

The effectiveness of teaching-learning activities is contingent upon the nature of the classroom culture.

To be effective, teaching-learning activities must be embedded within a complex system called the classroom setting, which in turn is part of other complex systems. One of these is the system of teacher understanding and teacher knowledge. This system is part of another complex system of beliefs, values, and ideology which teachers hold. All of these complex systems are in constant interaction, and there is a flow of information across each system's boundaries, which are analogous to semi-permeable membranes that mark the boundaries of biological systems.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research strongly suggest that teaching-learning activities are more than simple procedural recipes that can be gathered together in simplistic "teacher cookbooks" to be successfully used by *all* teachers in *all* classrooms to



promote and support literacy learning. The effectiveness of teaching-learning activities is contingent upon the nature of the classroom culture in which they're embedded and this contingency relationship is extremely complex.

When teachers set out to create a classroom culture or design a teaching-learning activity, they must, of necessity, make assumptions about learners and the learning process. With respect to literacy learning, this presupposes specific assumptions about language, language learners, and the process of

language learning. The complexity doesn't stop here. These assumptions are related to assumptions about what kinds of literacy our schools ought to be promoting, and this, in turn, is related to a deeper layer of assumptions about what kind of society we want to live in and the role that literacy can play in creating that society.

In the final analysis, the effectiveness of teaching-learning activities depends on professional knowledge and skill. Teachers need time, opportunity, and support to develop such professionalism. Those who get

caught up in the "quick-fix" mentality that seems to motivate many of today's administrators and politicians are denied these opportunities. The lack of such opportunities increases the danger that many of them will become dependent on the "tips-for-teachers" recipe book. We need to encourage a culture of teaching where teachers not only want to teach but understand the necessity of seeing themselves as thinkers.

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